

Meeting of the Children's Cabinet
July 28, 2021
9:30 – 11:00 AM
Patrick Henry Building, West Reading Room
1111 E Broad St., Richmond, Virginia 23219

MEETING MINUTES

Members Present: First Lady Pamela Northam, Secretary Atif Qarni, Secretary Brian Moran, Secretary Bettina Ring

Members Absent: Lieutenant Governor Justin Fairfax, Secretary Daniel Carey

I. Introduction

First Lady Pamela Northam welcomed the Children's Cabinet, staff, and stakeholders attending the meeting. She provided welcome remarks and primarily discussed vaccination efforts and kick-off the fourth annual Back-to-School Tour. She welcomed Courtney Dozier to provide an update regarding the upcoming Special Session.

II. Update from Courtney Dozier, Policy Director

Courtney Dozier provided an overview of the upcoming Special Session of the General Assembly and explained what the legislature would be focused on addressing. She emphasized that the Special Session would be narrowly focused on allocating funds from the American Rescue Plan.

III. Update from Secretary Bettina Ring

Secretary Bettina Ring announced that, since the last Children's Cabinet meeting, Heidi Hertz was promoted to Deputy Secretary. She discussed how food insecurity has increased 20% since the start of COVID and that they are continuing to work with regional nonprofits, private sector partners and food banks to address food insecurity and support regional farmers. Secretary Ring also discussed how the Commonwealth has expanded benefit programs such as SNAP, VA Food Access, and meals through school.

Secretary Ring highlighted that the Governor would be announcing 15 VA Food Access Investment Fund awards later today.

She discussed how her office is continuing to work with UNITE US and other partners to address regional and local food insecurity and nutrition in VA.

IV. Update from Chidi Uche regarding Trauma-Informed Care

Chidi Uche provided an update regarding trauma-informed care efforts underway in the Secretary of Health and Human Resources office and their partners. She

highlighted that they have worked to determine what was felt as the greatest needs within communities and considerations for the upcoming budget/legislative cycle. She explained that the areas of greatest needs within communities revolved around the lack of behavioral health workforce and support for existing workforce (including trauma-informed training for professionals that work in a support role for children), lack of coordination of resources across systems (streamlining the process for families or an individual who need resources from multiple different providers), and no universal database for mental health resources for students. Legislative considerations identified for the upcoming legislative cycle are a state-funded trauma informed training in courts and schools, continued funding for Unite Virginia, and establishing a universal database for mental health resources that is coordinated with different systems across the Commonwealth.

V. Update from Gena Berger regarding the Family First Prevention Services Act

Deputy Chief Berger provided an overview of the data for the foster care system. The overall number of children has been reduced between 2019-2020; however, since 2014 there has been an overall increase. The data also shows a disproportionate number of Black and African-American children in child poverty and in the foster care system, specifically for aging out of the system without a permanent family. Family First has been implemented as of July 1, 2021. This Act disincentivizes congregate care by decreasing funding for programs that encourage it. The funding is now being redirected to prevention services, which prioritizes in-home prevention services and provides support for families. This includes the kinship navigator programs which provides support to kinship caregivers.

She explained that the new law also approves certain evidence-based services to youth who are at risk of foster care. This provides support to both parents and children. The Family First Act aims to increase relative placements, increase family-based placements, decrease congregate care, and increase the quality of congregate care. She explained that Family First is prevention, but it is not intended as primary intervention. There is now a five-year plan for primary prevention and the goal is that all families, youth and children in Virginia are safe and have the ability to thrive. This plan partners with groups and organizations throughout Virginia.

VI. Update from Deputy Secretary Kathy Burcher

Deputy Secretary Burcher provided an update related to K-12 Education. She explained that VDOE and VDH are running a campaign to get back to school for a healthy start. We have seen a decline in wellness visits, which has led to a decline in general vaccinations needed to return to school. Additionally, they have seen a decline in dental visits. This campaign will be targeted to parents to encourage students to go to the dentist and go to the doctor to receive vaccines. Two documents have been created to provide guidance for school divisions as they make decisions for health guidelines and also to the Virginia LEARNS group is a “return to learn” document which talks about how we bridge gaps in learning and learning recovery.

She explained that \$1.9 billion in ARPA funding being directed to K-12. The Governor additionally announced a \$500 million investment to improve air quality in schools. They now are looking at things that they have implemented that have worked well and that should be continued after the pandemic. These include coordinating state and federal funding, increase in summer learning engagement, stand up virtual academies and expanding access to virtual learning for students who benefit from that type of learning, increasing positions that support learning recovery (coaches, tutors, and interventionists), and expanding broadband access.

She discussed that all students will have access to in-person five days a week and that the goal is to provide this instruction without disruption, which is why our mitigation strategies are so important. She also explained that they are working to ensure all students are prepared for a healthy return to school.

VII. Update from Assistant Secretary David Cary

Assistant Secretary Cary provided an update regarding early childhood development and school readiness. He explained that there have been drops in enrollment with the most impacted being the Pre-K/Early Childcare area. He explained that the two biggest asks in the early childcare space was the passage of language to support early childcare funding and for Superintendent James Lane to waive the requirement that VPI programs only be filled with three-year-olds on subsidy and five-year-olds who are at risk.

Assistant Secretary Cary discussed how the transition from DSS to VDOE has been completed and that as of July 1, all early education programs are now at VDOE and that Jenna Conway has officially become the Deputy Superintendent of Early Childhood Education.

He explained how home visiting teams have seen increases in enrollment and participation and that DMAS has created a workgroup that will provide recommendations to the General Assembly.

He discussed how access to the Child Care Subsidy Program has been expanded its eligibility in Virginia and has nearly doubled accessibility in some areas. The deadline has also been extended to provide for more time to apply for the subsidy. As the vaccination rates increase, there is more childcare subsidy participation. They are at 82% capacity participation for the subsidy program and, in total, \$316.3 million in federal funding were allocated to Virginia for early childcare, specifically \$10 million went to PreK expansion. ARPA Child Care Stabilization Grants have been provided and child care providers will soon be able to apply for that money.

VIII. Update from Deputy Secretary Jae K Davenport

Deputy Secretary Davenport discussed various initiatives that agencies have been working on to improve safety and wellbeing for school aged children, including incorporating the Handle with Care program into schools across the Commonwealth, training school personnel and also working to strengthen suicide prevention efforts.

She discussed the importance of integrating better mental health training in communities and schools.

IX. Update from Secretary Atif Qarni

Secretary Qarni announced the taskforce for culturally inclusive meals and calendars to accommodate students of varying religious or cultural backgrounds.

X. Public Comment

Allison Gilbreath thanked everyone working with the Children's Cabinet for their work and specifically thanked Chidi Uche for her work on making Virginia a trauma-informed state.

Valerie L'Herrou from the Virginia Poverty Law Center thanked the Children's Cabiner for their work and expressed hope that the Children's cabinet would become a permanent part of the state government. She discussed how the pandemic has highlighted the importance of financial support for families. She also discussed how as Virginia enters the Special Session and the next legislative cycle, policymakers need to look at racial inequities when discussing distribution of support.

XI. Adjournment

First Lady Pamela Northam closed the meeting by thanking the members of the Children's Cabinet and those in attendance.